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Pleasantville: An Essay on Law, Power, and Transcendence in Our Cultural Mythological Past

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I. INTRODUCTION

It will be recorded that, in the waning decades of the twentieth century, in that part of the globe called the United States of America, a segment of the population labeled "baby boomers" and its offspring were hit by a wave of nostalgia for that period known, somewhat inaccurately, as "The Fifties."

It mattered not that many of those hit by the wave of nostalgia were too young to remember "The Fifties" with any degree of accuracy (or in some cases at all), because the nostalgia was not for the real time period but rather for "the fifties of the *mind*," a period which runs roughly from the end of World War II until the coming of the Beatles.

In the imaginative nostalgia which believes that popular culture images are true, "the fifties of the *mind*" is "remembered" as a golden age of simplicity, peace, prosperity, and community. It is a time before the activism of "the sixties of the *mind*,"¹ a time when America was still one country, indivisible, under God, when men and women approached each other secure and accepting of their assigned roles as daughter, wife, mother, son, husband, and father. Life was simple because the problems which plague us now were, in our imagination, absent.² Conflicts regarding race,³ gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, and class lines simply did not exist.³

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1. For Americans, the "the sixties of the *mind*" is, itself, not synonymous with the calendar decade, but rather is a period that extends roughly from the arrival of the Beatles in the United States through the early 1970s.

2. This point is made in the movie, *The American President*. Columbia Pictures (1995). In the film, a liberal President (Michael Douglas) becomes the target of personal

Life in “the fifties of the *mind*” mirrors, to a large extent, images from popular culture, including movies and television such as situation comedies.⁴ The picture of life in that era presented in popular media is centered around stable, two-parent, suburban families in which divorce was unknown, sex was confined to the marital bed or, indeed, two well-separated twin beds, and was a private matter about which it was unnecessary to speak.⁵ Of course, a healthy interest in the opposite sex was assumed and even expressed in wholesome ways. When a handsome boy walked a pretty girl in her poodle skirt home from the prom, “it” was there, but so muted that it appeared as romance alone—without any expectation of actual consummation, if for no other reason than the certainty that the girl could be counted on to say “no.”

attacks by a conservative opponent (Richard Dreyfuss). *Id.* Eventually, the President responds at a news briefing:

I've known Bob Rumson for years and I've been operating under the assumption that the reason Bob devotes so much time and energy shouting at the rain was that he simply didn't get it. Well, I was wrong. Bob's problem isn't that he doesn't get it, Bob's problem is that he can't sell it. We have serious problems to solve and we need serious people to solve them. And whatever your particular problem is, I promise you Bob Rumson is not the least bit interested in solving it. He is interested in two things and two things only. Making you afraid of it and telling you who's to blame for it. That, ladies and gentlemen, is how you win elections. *You gather a group of middle-age, middle-class, middle-income voters who remember with longing an easier time, and you talk to them about family and American values and character and you wave an old photo of the president's girlfriend and you scream about patriotism you tell them she is to blame for their lot in life and you go on television and you call her a whore.*

Id. (emphasis added).

3. DAVID HALBERSTAM, *Preface* to *THE FIFTIES* x (1993). “Three decades later, the fifties appear to be an orderly era, one with a minimum of social dissent. Photographs from the period tend to show people who dressed carefully: men in suits, ties, and—when outdoors—hats; the women with their hair in modified page-boys, pert and upbeat.” *Id.*

4. STEPHANIE COONTZ, *THE WAY WE NEVER WERE: AMERICAN FAMILIES AND THE NOSTALGIA TRAP* 23 (1992) “Our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sit-coms.” *Id.*

5. HALBERSTAM, *supra* note 3, at 140. “The original version of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, noted writer Ron Rosenbaum, was ‘about the horror of being in the ’burbs. About neighbors whose lives had so lost their individual distinctiveness they could be taken over by alien vegetable pods—and no one would know the difference.’” *Id.*

There were rules back then, carefully handed down from wise elders to the young.⁶ There was comfort in knowing “what was what” and how things were. People were as they were “supposed” to be. Indeed, this feeling of contentedness came from more than rules. Those in authority were secure in their unquestioned *right* to set the rules. The sixties slogan, “Question Authority,” would have seemed out of place and strange. People were comfortable with the ease of mind which comes from knowing one’s place in the world. Everyone was satisfied and everyone “got along.”

II. COMMUNITY AND “THE OTHER”

“The fifties of the *mind*” was a time and place where people lived in harmony with each other, in which each person had a place in the social order and was happy with that place. It was a place without strife or social conflict. It was a homogeneous community.

Community can be a benevolent force. Community “brings people together.” The sense of being a part of something and of sharing commonality with others can be powerful and good. Yet, there is another potential side of community which is far more troubling. If community offers its members social interaction as a part of something larger, it also offers protection, security, and safety. But it must be asked, safety from what?

Communities generally define themselves by what they have in common.⁷ Shared values and ideas or shared customs may be part of that mix.⁸ Sometimes the community’s definition includes a shared religion or perhaps a shared race.⁹ By the nature of definition, defining a community by what is shared and common, by what is homogeneous, requires the identification, the naming and labeling of what is not part of the community.¹⁰ Perhaps inevitably, that which is “us,” the community, will be seen as good, and perhaps better than, what is not “us.”¹¹ There is the

6. Messages of “right living” were also promulgated through the schools, especially in films shown to school children. In *Mental Hygiene: Classroom Films 1945–70*, author Ken Smith examines films such as *Dating Do’s and Don’ts* which taught school children how they were supposed to behave. See KEN SMITH, *MENTAL HYGIENE: CLASSROOM FILMS 1945–70* (1999).

7. See generally Iris Marion Young, *The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference* in FEMINISM/ POSTMODERNISM 300 (Linda J. Nicholson ed. 1990); Paul Joseph, ‘Our Town’ or ‘Twin Peaks’: *The Dark Side of Community*, in VI *Focus on Law Studies Teaching about Law in the Liberal Arts* 1 A.B.A. (Fall 1990), at 5.

8. See Young, *supra* note 7, at 311.

9. See *id.*

10. See *id.*

11. See *id.*

community and there is the “other.”¹² This process of identifying what or who is or is not the community may not always be a benign process.¹³ In fact, it can manifest itself in hostility to and aggression against the “other.”

Racism, ethnic chauvinism, and class devaluation . . . grow partly from a desire for community, that is, from the desire to understand others as they understand themselves and from the desire to be understood as I understand myself. Practically speaking, such mutual understanding can be approximated only within a homogeneous group that defines itself by common attributes. . . . Such common identification, however, entails reference also to those excluded. In the dynamics of racism and ethnic chauvinism in the United States today, the positive identification of some groups is often achieved by first defining other groups as the other, the devalued semihuman.¹⁴

While some communities define their sameness broadly enough to include and therefore to accept, or at least tolerate, a large measure of deviance, others do not. To the extent that a community defines itself by perceived shared traits among its members, and to the extent that these traits are very narrowly defined, even relatively small deviations from the norm may be perceived as endangering the stability, and indeed the survival, of the community itself. In the face of such a perceived threat the most extreme measures may seem to be justified.

The “threat” of deviance may be perceived to be particularly serious when the “deviant” claims to be part of the community itself. The threat is perceived to be so high because, if the “deviant’s” claim is accepted, then one of the defining aspects of the community itself must be abandoned. The community must either change, or bring the deviant back into conformity, or expel the deviant from membership in the community.

III. THE POLITICS OF “THE FIFTIES OF THE MIND”

This general description of the community versus the “other” explains the emotional power of defining a person as being part of the group as opposed to being an outsider. The power may be particularly strong, and particularly dangerous, when images of community and the “other” become part of the political discourse, that is, when politicians heighten awareness

12. See *id.*

13. See Young, *supra* note 7, at 312.

14. *Id.* at 311–12.

and tension between those who they identify as part of the political and social community and those who are identified as the "others." The "others" are often a minority lacking economic or political power. Yet, as they are identified as alien to the community, the powerful majority comes to fear and then to hate them. This can lead to repression, violence, and genocide.¹⁵

Even where the results are not so extreme, they can be very serious. In the United States, as well as in other countries, waves of anti-immigrant sentiment have periodically been a part of the political landscape. White politicians in the South routinely played whites off against blacks.¹⁶ John Kennedy's Catholicism was an issue in his 1960 presidential campaign. George Wallace, David Duke, and Patrick Buchanan are examples of modern age politicians who practiced politics of division and whose views raised both anger and fear among minority communities.

The same dynamic can sometimes be seen in our mainstream political discourse. It comes as no surprise that clashes of cultural values which seek to identify the good American from "the other" have occupied a significant, some might even say preeminent, place in American politics of late. Some have labeled recent political differences as "culture wars." What is striking is the anger expressed and the personal demonization of one's political opponents. Whether the issue is abortion or affirmative action or free trade, there seems to be a tendency to identify one's opponents as evil, as alien, as "the other." The two sides present sharply contrasting visions of America's past and its present. Each vision seeks to define the "true" American community and each, in the process, seeks to define the other as "out of the mainstream," as "the other."

The "liberal" or "Democratic" vision suggests that the United States, for all its excellent aspirations and economic strength is still, to an extent, captive to its history, leaving it as a partially fulfilled dream that is deeply flawed. Racism, sexism, poverty, religious bigotry, homophobia, and class conflict serve to marginalize many segments of the American community while centralizing power in the hands of a few.

15. The Nazi holocaust proceeded in stages. Jews were identified as an alien and destructive presence which needed to be cleansed from Aryan Germany. See UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM, *THE HOLOCAUST: A HISTORICAL SUMMARY* at 3. After Jews were identified as the "other" they were dehumanized in the German mind and isolated from mainstream life. See *id.* The process set the stage for popular acceptance of mass murder. More recent examples of demonization, isolation, and elimination can be seen in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and even in our own past where it was said that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." Wolfgang Mieder, "The Only Good Indian is a Dead Indian" *History and Meaning of Proverbial Stereotype*, 1 ELECTRONIC J. INT'L PROVERB STUD. 1 (1995) <<http://www.utas.edu.au/docs/flonta/DP,1,1,95/index.html>>.

16. See HAROLD M. HYMAN, *A MORE PERFECT UNION: THE IMPACT OF THE CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION ON THE CONSTITUTION* 519 (1973).

Yet, this liberal vision is also progressive. People organize and demand change, fairness, and equality. In this vision, government is a powerful tool which responds to these demands and helps to level the playing field. Government programs protect the poorest and least powerful from oppression while giving them the means to progress into the great middle class. Laws are passed which ban discrimination.¹⁷ In this vision, the law is a powerful engine of social change, equality, opportunity, and the full realization of the American dream. By its nature, the vision embraces change and the social disruptions which can come with change.

The competing "conservative" or "Republican" vision has been quite different. It sees the United States as having achieved its dream at some point in the past. It sees the country as having drifted away from that perfection by falling away from our guiding principles of freedom, religion, and "traditional" family values.

In this vision, government is generally an evil, except when it is enforcing fundamentalist supported social norms. Taxes destroy individual liberty by shifting power to Washington. Government programs are ill-advised experiments in social engineering by those least qualified to know what is right. Social disruption is caused by turning away from correct values which, in turn, leads to social disintegration of the community.

Of course, these two visions are presented here in very broad strokes—in fact, almost in caricature. Neither vision is wholly consistent and each contains textures and nuance beyond simplistic labels and tag-lines. Yet, if the visions appear cartoon-like as presented here, they are often presented in the public forum in no less outlandish guise.

Think, for example, of how very complicated subjects, changing patterns of family, pregnancy and child-rearing, came to be capsulized in one popular culture issue—whether or not fictional television newswoman, Murphy Brown,¹⁸ was a good role model in having and raising a baby without the benefit of a husband. In a world where political ideas are debated in thirty-second television ads and evening news sound-bites, such gross oversimplification becomes the norm rather than the exception. The simplistic world of television comedies comes to embody "real" alternatives which are serious subjects of debate.¹⁹

17. See, e.g., Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C.A. §§ 2000e–2000e-17 (1995 & Supp. 1999); Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C.A. §§ 12101–12213 (1995 & Supp. 1999).

18. *Murphy Brown* originally aired on CBS.

19. "When liberals and conservatives debate family policy, for example, the issue is often framed in terms of how many 'Ozzie and Harriet' families are left in America." COONTZ, *supra* note 4, at 23.

Since everyone admits that nontraditional families are now a majority, why this obsessive concern to establish a higher or lower figure? Liberals seem to think that unless they can prove the "Leave It to Beaver" family is on an irreversible slide toward extinction, they cannot justify introducing new family definitions and social policies. Conservatives believe that if they can demonstrate the traditional family is alive and well, although endangered by policies that reward two-earner families and single parents, they can pass measures to revive the seeming placidity and prosperity of the 1950s, associated in many people's minds with the relative stability of marriage, gender roles, and family life in that decade. If the 1950s family existed today, both sides seem to assume, we would not have the contemporary social dilemmas that cause such debate.²⁰

The argument that we, as a nation, have lost our way must, of necessity, suggest that there was a time when we were on the right path. The most obvious point of reference, of course, is "the fifties of the *mind*." Whether it is born of rosy nostalgia or mythic imagination, it stands as an idyllic period of certainty, stability, harmony, and community.

IV. PLEASANTVILLE

*Pleasantville*²¹ was released on October 23, 1998, less than a month before the election of 1998. The campaign leading up to this election had been one in which culture wars were prominent. *Pleasantville* is a fable²² where two 1990s teens are magically sucked into their television set to the black-and-white situation comedy *Pleasantville*. David (Tobey Maguire) is a sensitive misfit, out of step with the sophisticated, jaded, trouble-plagued modern world. At school, he is unsuccessful with women because he does not have the half-hood, half-blase style of his peers. His parents are divorced and in early scenes we see his mother on the phone with his father. She has made plans to go away with her boyfriend for a mud bath and is very

20. *Id.* at 23–24.

21. New Line Cinema (1998).

22. A fable is defined as a "usually short narrative making an edifying or cautionary point" THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 652 (3d ed. 1992). While the film, at 124 minutes, may not be short, it is a cautionary tale. Because the premise of the film, that two modern children can be sucked into a television show, is presented without a clear explanation, the film is also something of a fairy tale, defined as a "fictitious, highly fanciful story or explanation." *Id.* at 656. The filmmaker goes so far as to use a title screen with the words "once upon a time," between an introductory sequence and the rest of the film.

put out that the father has unexpectedly canceled when he is supposed to have a custodial weekend. It is easy, from David's point of view, to feel that neither parent really wants him.

To retreat from a world in which he does not fit, he becomes lost in one where he thinks he does. The object of his obsession is *Pleasantville*, a black-and-white situation comedy set in the 1950s and broadcast on "TV Time," a cable network broadcasting "lots of old stuff in nothing but black-and-white."²³ *Pleasantville* is the "fifties of the imagination," where role-defined two-parent families raise loving and respectful children in neighborhoods of single-family homes, each one with its white picket fence.²⁴ As the promo for the upcoming *Pleasantville* marathon says, it is "chock full of pure family values. . . . Flash back to kinder, gentler times."

David's sister, Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon), appears to be his opposite in almost every way. She is sexy, sophisticated, and popular. She is knowledgeable beyond her years and appears always to be in control. She's cool with an attitude, living in high school's fast lane.

As David prepares to watch the *Pleasantville* marathon on the family's big-screen television, Jennifer is at home in front of the television, preparing for her hot date with her latest flame. Her outfit, she explains, isn't "slutty"—it's "fun." As the teens struggle for the television remote, it is smashed beyond repair. Suddenly, a mysterious television repairman, (Don Knotts), shows up and, after quizzing David on various questions of *Pleasantville* trivia, suggests that he takes a special remote control that will "put him in the picture." This magical trickster "watches" from his truck as the siblings, again struggling over the remote, are magically sucked into the television and right into the world of the *Pleasantville* marathon.

Now seen by all in the show as "Bud" and "Mary Sue," the siblings find themselves inside the show with no way to get home. That they even want to leave so upsets the repairman, who talks to them through the television set in the *Pleasantville* house, that he leaves in a huff. The kids, now in "living black-and-white" like the rest of the *Pleasantville* world, are ushered into the kitchen for a huge cholesterol-laden breakfast made by mom before being sent off to school.

23. Flashes of opening credits from real situation comedies such as *I Married Joan*, (originally aired on NBC) *I Love Lucy*, (originally aired on CBS), *The Honeymooners*, (originally aired on CBS) *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, (originally aired on ABC), and *Make Room for Daddy*, (originally aired on ABC).

24. "By the mid-fifties television portrayed a wonderfully antiseptic world of idealized homes in an idealized, unflawed America. There were no economic crises, no class divisions or resentments, no ethnic tensions, few if any hyphenated Americans, few if any minority characters. Indeed there were no intrusions from other cultures." HALBERSTAM, *supra* note 3, at 508.

The *Pleasantville* world is indeed “pleasant,” or, as Jennifer complains, like being “stuck in Nerdville.” In the world of *Pleasantville*, fire departments have no other job but to save cats from trees, the basketball team sinks every shot, and everyone is wholesome, friendly, and smiling. Although both David and Jennifer want to get home, David says they have to play along and even Jennifer, once she meets Skip Martin, decides that perhaps she will stick around awhile.

To be sure, there are some disquieting facets of life in *Pleasantville*. The school curriculum consists of nothing besides studying the difference between the two main streets in town, there are no toilets in the bathrooms, and all the books are blank. Indeed, the townspeople have no capacity for original thought. A question from Jennifer about what is outside Pleasantville is met with stunned silence. Mr. Johnson, at the soda shop, wipes a hole in his countertop because “Bud” wasn’t there to set out the napkins and glasses as is their routine. A momentary thought that “Mary Sue” might not go out with him causes basketball star Skip Martin to miss a shot, something which has never happened before and which causes consternation in their ordered world. The rebel, Jennifer, moves from questioning her teacher about what exists outside of the town to introducing her date, Skip, to sex.

Here is the central crux of *Pleasantville*. The situation comedy represents the “fifties of the *mind*.” Now, however, we go behind the myth. First, we encounter the stultifying limits and narrowness of this world. Second, we see the effect of introducing change into this setting. And then, we see the reaction of the town and its inhabitants to change.

Mr. Johnson, the soda shop owner, discovers to his delight that he can close the shop on his own and can even change the order of his chores. “Bud’s” mother, Betty, begins to look differently at Mr. Johnson. The basketball team does not automatically make baskets and a rose, in full color, blooms in *Pleasantville*.

As the pace of change continues, Jennifer explains sex to her *Pleasantville* mother, Betty. Betty puts her new knowledge to work. Although she is sure that her husband would never do such a thing, she tries out masturbation, which causes a tree outside the house to spontaneously combust. There is finally a need for firefighters in *Pleasantville*. When they arrive, they are too stunned to know what to do—David has to grab the hose to extinguish the flames.

Mr. Johnson discovers his true passions, for art and for Bud’s mother. The music of Dave Brubeck fills the air. The young people have discovered sex and they have started to ask questions like, “what’s outside of *Pleasantville*?” David reluctantly tells them that “there are some places where the road doesn’t go in a circle. There are some places where the road

keeps going.” And the books are no longer blank.²⁵ Another amazing thing happens—the colors start to spread. Not only are roses, fires, playing cards, and bubble gum in color, but, so too, are some of the people.

If the *Pleasantville* series represents the “fifties of the *mind*” (the calendar reads 1958), the town is now feeling the winds of change. The young, and young at heart, are discovering sex, the wives are not paying attention to traditional wifely duties,²⁶ kids are quitting their jobs and some, especially, but not exclusively the kids, are learning new ideas and questioning old ones.²⁷ The town is not a homogeneous community anymore. Some people are in black-and-white but others are in color.

The powers that be in the town, including the Mayor, the barbershop crowd, civic leaders, and Bud’s dad, a wannabe insider whose dream is to be asked to join the Chamber of Commerce, are alarmed by what they see. As one of them notes, “going up to that lake all the time is one thing but now they’re going to a library. What’s next?” “You’re right,” says another. “Somebody ought to do something about that—soon.” The power structure, white, male, black-and-white, is confronted with change, and the townspeople see it as a threat to everything they hold dear.²⁸ As Bob says, “if George here doesn’t get his dinner, any one of us could be next. . . . Something is happening to our town and I think we can all see where it’s coming from.”

The Mayor neatly sums up the situation:

My friends, this isn’t about George’s dinner. It isn’t about Roy’s shirt. It’s a question of values, the question of whether we want to hold on to those values that made this place great. So, a time has

25. Initially, books “fill in” as David or Jennifer tell their stories. Jennifer has explained part of *Huckleberry Finn*, but since she hasn’t finished it, the book remains half blank. The kids in the soda shop ask David to tell the ending. He says, “they were running away, Huck and the slave. They were going up the river trying to get free, and in trying to get free, they see that they’re sort of free already.” And the rest of the book fills in.

26. A scene in which all the husbands come home from work, dressed identically and in black-and-white, is particularly effective. “Bud’s” father enters, puts his hat on the hat rack, sets down his briefcase, and calls, “honey, I’m home,” only to discover that Betty is absent and his world is altered forever. Another man, Roy, shamefully shows his burned shirt. When he asked his wife what she was doing, she said that she was “thinking.”

27. Jennifer is going through her own voyage of discovery. She has started to read books but wonders why she is still in black-and-white when she has had so much more sex than many girls that are in color. Only after she declines to go to lover’s lane and stays home to study does she turn from black-and-white to color.

28. “Bud’s” mother has even covered her colored face in black-and-white make-up in order to “pass,” but when she visits Mr. Johnson and starts to cry he sees what she has done, tells her she’s beautiful, and wipes away the make-up to reveal the color underneath.

come to make a decision. Are we in this thing alone or are we in it together?

"Together!" they shout, and the battle lines are drawn. Notices go up calling for a town meeting for all *true* citizens of Pleasantville.

George, in the flush of solidarity, goes home to confront Betty, who has spent the night with Mr. Johnson. He tells her to come with him to the meeting but she says the meeting is not for her. George says she can wear make-up, that her color will go away, but she says she does not want it to. Finally, George demands that Betty put on black-and-white make-up, come to the meeting, and make his dinner. She gently tells him "no" and leaves.

David, who wanted to stay in the *Pleasantville* television world, has remained in black-and-white, but he, too, is changing as he finds that Margaret, a girl in his class, is interested in him. She, of course, has turned color and is taunted by two black-and-white boys who behave as leering thugs. Why isn't "Bud" at the meeting, they ask? Could it be that he's too busy with his "colored" girlfriend?

At the town meeting, the Mayor explains that things have always been pleasant but are not now. He declares, "we must separate out the things that are pleasant from the things that are unpleasant." As the next day dawns, we see the result of the civic authorities' handiwork. The hardware store sports a sign reading "no colored." And the rule of the mob begins. Mr. Johnson's painting of a nude Betty is smashed as are the rest of his artwork and his shop. The mob destroys the book of fine art paintings and burns the books in the library. Several black-and-white youths corner "Bud's" mother in what appears to be a rape in the making. David intervenes and punches one of the boys. David has finally taken a moral stand and now he also turns color.

The colored citizens take temporary refuge in the destroyed soda shop. Meanwhile, at a second town meeting, the black-and-white citizens adopt a code of conduct which, among other things, closes lovers lane and the library, forbids all music except "temperate and pleasant" music, and limits acceptable paint colors to black, white, and gray.²⁹ School curricula are required to teach the "non-changeist view of history, emphasizing continuity over alteration."

David refuses to obey the new code. In acts of civil disobedience, he plays prohibited music,³⁰ and with Mr. Johnson, who says, "I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't paint anymore," paints a beautiful new mural recounting the recent violence and other events in vibrant, forbidden colors.

29. The only allowable music is Johnny Mathis, Perry Como, the marches of John Phillip Sousa, and "The Star Spangled Banner."

30. The music of Buddy Holly.

The two are arrested and put on trial. Prior to the trial, George visits David in jail and asks what went wrong. David gently explains, "people change."

The trial takes place in a courtroom which is deeply reminiscent of the one from the film, *To Kill a Mockingbird*,³¹ including its segregated seating, with the "colored" confined to the balcony. David asks for a lawyer but is refused on the grounds that the proceeding will be more "pleasant" without one.

David makes an impassioned statement asserting that the colored and non-colored people are the same—that the same qualities are in all people. The Mayor refuses to accept this explanation and tries to stop him from speaking but David persists, asking his father whether he really wants Betty the way she was. "Doesn't she look wonderful? Don't you wish you could tell her that?" George nods, cries, and changes to color himself. As the Mayor tries to stop the proceeding, as he protests that he isn't like that, the Mayor becomes enraged and turns color himself. The Mayor runs out and the rest of the people turn color, as does the whole town. The television store even has color television. Change has come to Pleasantville.

Jennifer decides to stay in the new Pleasantville to go to college. She has dropped her posturing and attitude. She is more of a real person. David goes home too, but he is changed. He has stood up for an ideal. He has fought a battle and is ready to return to live in his complex, difficult world, where he finds his real mother crying. She has dumped her younger boyfriend and is struggling to figure out answers about herself and her life. She cries, "it's not supposed to be like this." Bud explains that "it's not *supposed* to be anything." Back in Pleasantville, Betty is a woman in transition. She is torn between her husband and Mr. Johnson, and although we are left in doubt as to her final direction in life, it is clear that she is ready to face the responsibility of deciding.

Pleasantville ends with the message that no set of predefined rules can govern life's uncertainties, that each person must struggle to find their own answer, and that this responsibility is a good rather than a bad thing.

V. LAW AND JUSTICE IN *PLEASANTVILLE*

On the surface, Pleasantville is a harmonious community where life is good. Yet, when we look closer we realize that the tranquility of Pleasantville is purchased at a terrible price. Life is "pleasant" because the residents do not think or grow. They are locked into a stifling routine in which homogeneity is exulted and difference rigidly suppressed. And the first sign of change, rebellion, or growth results in both a violent and a legal response by the power structure attempting to maintain the status quo. The

31. Universal International Pictures (1962).

filmmaker suggests that the 1950s of our imagination also conceals a grimmer reality of repression hidden just below the surface of fond remembrance. Pleasantville is repressive in a number of different ways which mirror elements of the historical 1950s.

Pleasantville is racist. The power structure is clearly white, although the key point in the film is that its members are "in" black-and-white, and react to oppress those who are not. The "no coloreds" sign in the hardware store reminds us that the real fifties was the last decade of legal segregation in which the repression and disenfranchisement of African-Americans was all too real.³²

32. Today, the young may think of civil rights in the 1950s as a time of triumph. Many may know only about *Brown v. Board of Educ.*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). But *Brown* did not end segregation, even in schools. The historic decision merely began a process which played itself out not only in courts but in the streets, in which significant segments of American society fought an all-out rear-guard action to undermine the process of integration and the assertion of rights by African-Americans. The reality of life at a time before federal anti-discrimination and voting rights acts is probably hard to imagine for most who were too young to experience it. The reality of life for African-Americans of that period is symbolized as much by the murder of Emmett Till as it is by the decision in *Brown*.

The same Constitution which required desegregation entitled a defendant to a trial before a jury of his peers. His peers, in large areas of the South, were likely to acquit him. This happened. The first such incident occurred in Greenwood, Mississippi, in August 1955. Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black youth from Chicago, was visiting relatives there. Rumor spread that he had insulted a white woman, and three white men dragged him from his relatives' home and drowned him. Witnesses identified two of the three killers to federal agents, but an all-white jury acquitted them. The two . . . were then charged with kidnapping by a U.S. attorney, but a grand jury refused to indict them, and the FBI, which had painstakingly assembled irrefutable evidence, reluctantly closed its file.

WILLIAM MANCHESTER, *THE GLORY AND THE DREAM: A NARRATIVE HISTORY OF AMERICA, 1932-1972* 738 (Bantam ed., 1975).

African-Americans in the South faced systematic, legally sanctioned segregation and pervasive brutality, and those in the North were excluded by restrictive covenants and redlining from many benefits of the economic expansion that their labor helped sustain. Whites resisted, with harassment and violence, the attempts of blacks to participate in the American family dream. When Harvey Clark tried to move into Cicero, Illinois, in 1951, a mob of 4,000 whites spent four days tearing his apartment apart while police stood by and joked with them. In 1953, the first black family moved into Chicago's Trumbull Park public housing project; neighbors "hurled stones and tomatoes" and trashed stores that sold groceries to the new residents. In Detroit, *Life Magazine* reported in 1957, "10,000 Negroes work at the Ford plant in nearby Dearborn, [but] not one Negro can live in Dearborn itself."

COONTZ, *supra* note 4, at 30-31 (footnote omitted).

Pleasantville is sexist. The power structure is male. Women are confined to the traditional realm of the home. As Pleasantville begins to change, the men react against the loss of traditional male privilege by trying to force women back into their prior role. This mirrors the post-war reality, during which women who had been encouraged to work in war industries during World War II were pushed back into the home.³³ Women's growing frustration was labeled as mental aberration and treated with tranquilizers. Dissatisfaction was treated as a mental disease.³⁴

Pleasantville is sexually repressive. There is no sex in Pleasantville and even married people sleep separately in single beds. The discovery of sex is a major engine of change among the people of Pleasantville and the power structure understands the threat that it poses to the stability of its town, just as the pill and the sexual revolution of the sixties were part of the rebellion against the double standard of the fifties.³⁵

33.

After the war, however, writes one recent student of postwar reconstruction, "management went to extraordinary lengths to purge women workers from the auto plants," as well as from other high-paying and nontraditional jobs. As it turned out, in most cases women were not permanently expelled from the labor force but were merely downgraded to lower-paid, "female" jobs. Even at the end of the purge, there were more women working than before the war, and by 1952 there were two million more wives at work than at the peak of wartime production. The jobs available to these women, however, lacked the pay and the challenges that had made wartime work so satisfying, encouraging women to define themselves in terms of home and family even when they were working.

Id. at 31.

34.

Women who could not walk the fine line between nurturing motherhood and castrating "momism," or who had trouble adjusting to "creative homemaking," were labeled neurotic, perverted, or schizophrenic. A recent study of hospitalized "schizophrenic" women in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1950s concludes that institutionalization and sometimes electric shock treatments were used to force women to accept their domestic roles and their husbands' dictates. Shock treatments were recommended for women who sought abortion, on the assumption that failure to want a baby signified dangerous emotional disturbance.

Id. at 32 (footnote omitted).

35.

The success of sexual containment depended on sexual inequality. Men no longer bore the responsibility of "saving themselves for marriage"; this was now exclusively a woman's job. In sharp contrast to the nineteenth century, when "oversexed" or demanding men were considered to have serious problems, it was now considered "normal" or "natural" for men to be sexually aggressive. The "average man," advice writers for women

Pleasantville is intellectually repressive. There is no freedom of thought in Pleasantville. The books are blank and the school curriculum is limited to a study of the streets in the town. As things begin to change, the books are filled in, questions are asked, new forms of art are discovered and explored. The power structure responds by closing the library and requiring that schools teach only orthodoxy. The real 1950s also occasioned intellectual, artistic, and political repression.³⁶ For example, the cold war fueled McCarthyism's witch hunts.³⁷ In addition, enforced political

commented indulgently, "will go as far as you let him go." When women succeeded in "holding out" (a phrase charged with moral ambiguity), they sometimes experienced problems "letting go," even after marriage; when they failed, they were often reproached later by their husbands for having "given in." The contradictions of this double standard could not long withstand the period's pressures for companionate romance: By 1959, a more liberal single standard had already gained ground among older teenagers across America.

Id. at 40.

36.

In March of 1947, President Truman issued an executive order establishing a sweeping federal-employee loyalty program designed to exclude persons disloyal to the United States. It was pursuant to this executive order that the infamous 'Attorney General's list' of subversive organizations, first published in December 1947 came into being. Membership in organizations designated by the Attorney General as 'totalitarian, fascist, communist, or subversive' was among 'the activities and associations of an applicant or employee which may be considered in connection with [a] determination of disloyalty.'"

...

But the most comprehensive and detailed piece of federal legislation directed against the CPUSA was the Internal Security Act of 1950, also known as the McCarran Act, that was enacted over President Truman's veto. The heart of the Act was a registration requirement applicable to 'Communist-action' and 'Communist-front' organizations, as defined by the Act; such organizations were subject to serious penalties if they failed to register. The Act also created a Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB) to determine which organizations were subject to the Act. Registration was to be accompanied by disclosure of the names and addresses of officers, and in the case of a 'Communist-action' organization such as the CPUSA, of its members as well. Serious disabilities befell the members of organizations required to register, including prohibitions on federal employment, public communications, and access to passports.

Marc Rohr, *Communists and the First Amendment: The Shaping of Freedom of Advocacy in the Cold War Era*, 28 SAN DIEGO L. REV. 12-14 (1991) (footnotes omitted).

37.

World events right after the war made it easier to build up public support for the anti-Communist crusade at home. In 1948, the Communist

orthodoxy made artistic or literary experimentation suspect and created a climate of fear.³⁸

One of the most interesting aspects of the movie, *Pleasantville*, is the role of law. While many of us see the law as a progressive tool for social change, law is also power and can be wielded for good or for ill. In *Pleasantville*, the law is a repressive force.

When they are faced with the changes in *Pleasantville*, the city fathers (and they all are) call a town meeting to which only those who are still in black-and-white are invited. The enfranchised pass a code of conduct that has the force of law. The code has previously been referred to: it outlaws the double bed, the library, colors in art, free thought in education, and most music. It is law made by one group to control another. The "colored" are disenfranchised and have no part in making the laws which bind them.

party in Czechoslovakia ousted non-Communists from the government and established their own rule. The Soviet Union that year blockaded Berlin . . . In 1949, there was the Communist victory in China, and in that year also, the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb. In 1950 the Korean war began. These were all portrayed to the public as signs of a world Communist conspiracy. . . .

...

So it was not just Soviet expansionism that was threatening to the United States government and to American business interests. In fact, China, Korea, Indochina, and the Philippines represented local Communist movements, not Russian fomentation. It was a general wave of anti-imperialist insurrection, which the United States wanted to defeat. This would require national unity, for militarization of the budget, for the suppression of domestic opposition to such a foreign policy. . . .

In this atmosphere, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin could go even further than Truman. As chairman of the Permanent Investigations Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Government Operations, he claimed that the State Department employed hundreds of Communists, a claim for which he had no evidence. He investigated the State Department's information program, its Voice of America, and its overseas libraries, which included books by people whom McCarthy considered Communists.

HOWARD ZINN, *A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES: TEACHING EDITION* 313-14 (1997).

38. "On May 20, 1947, the F.B.I. began stalking 'disloyal and subversive persons' by conducting a 'name check' of the two million people on federal payrolls, from mailmen to cabinet members." MANCHESTER, *supra* note 32, at 494. When any accusations were made against a person, or when any "derogatory information" was given to the bureau, there ensued a "full field investigation" into every aspect of the life and background of the accused individual. *Id.* "Accumulated data were weighed by a regional loyalty board which would either dismiss charges or hold a hearing and reach a verdict. Adverse decisions could be appealed to the National Loyalty Review Board in Washington, whose rulings were final." *Id.*

When David and Mr. Johnson violate the code by painting a colorful and sensual mural, they are brought to trial before the Mayor and the city fathers. The accused are forbidden access to legal representation and the Mayor acts as both prosecutor and judge. The courtroom is rigidly segregated.

The image of law in *Pleasantville* is that of a tool of repression, of power wielded against the powerless, as a form of violence. The law does not, in this film, have any corrective or transformative power. The system is rotten beyond repair.

David does not play the game. He does not “win” his case by using the law. Rather, he moves first his father and then the Mayor to experience their deepest emotions and they are transformed by that experience into “coloreds” themselves. The trial ends because the system it supported has simply ceased to exist.

VI. THE LESSONS OF PLEASANTVILLE

If the “fifties of the *mind*” has been used to create in the American political psyche an image of a perfect past based on a venerated but narrow set of social mores and values, *Pleasantville* reminds us that this pastoral vision is incomplete, that it hides a dark repression under a thin veneer of normalcy. Racial segregation, repression of women, and suppression of alternative ideas and lifestyles are all central to sustaining traditional power structures. Enforced conformity produces an illusionary stability and a false happiness by denying expression to any but the accepted orthodoxy.

The real fifties were not only a time of repression but also a time when the seeds of social change were planted. The civil rights struggle had begun and was starting to win legal victories such as *Brown v. Board of Education*³⁹ and the subsequent integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Perhaps as importantly, the ordinary people such as Rosa Parks began to find their voice and so encouraged others to engage in direct confrontations of racism.⁴⁰

McCarthyism, the Hollywood blacklists, and the prosecutions of Communists eventually led to a more enlightened climate in which First Amendment advocates won significant legal victories for freedom of speech and students and others demanded freedom of speech on campuses and in

39. 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

40. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to obey a Montgomery, Alabama bus driver's order to vacate her seat. “At that moment, Eldridge Cleaver later wrote, ‘somewhere in the universe a gear in the machinery had shifted.’” MANCHESTER, *supra* note 32, at 740.

society generally.⁴¹ The enforced gender roles of the post-war years led to dissatisfaction with those roles, which resulted in the modern feminist movement.⁴²

Inevitably, freedom allows us to question existing power structures and leads to societal change. Change, by its nature, can be frightening. People feel at sea because, in a sense, they are. As experienced by Betty, George, and Mr. Johnson in *Pleasantville*, the change is obvious but the eventual new stability may not be as apparent. It is probably normal to find that, as the worst aspects of a given time fade from memory, what remains is nostalgia for that era's stability and peace. To the extent that a false image of the "fifties of the *mind*" has been used for political gain, *Pleasantville* seeks to remind us that the image is false.

It has been said that democracy is a terrible system, but better than all the others. So, too, freedom of thought and expression are terrible, leading to dislocation and social upheaval. But lack of such freedom is even worse. This is the message of *Pleasantville*—a cautionary tale for all who would, unthinkingly, adopt a false image of our past as the blueprint for our present and future.

41. *Compare*, *Dennis v. United States*, 341 U.S. 494 (1951), *with* *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444 (1969).

42. "The reemergence of a women's rights movement occurred some time between the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 and the founding convention of the National Organization for Women in 1966." COONTZ, *supra* note 4, at 165–66.

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